"The Bush administration seems to have misinterpreted the title of the Endangered Species Act. The law is meant to protect endangered species, rather than to endanger species," scolded the Scranton (Pa.) Times-Tribune.

"If the problem is that the process is too slow," opined the Austin (Tex.) American-Statesman, "the solution is simple: Hire more people at the two agencies with the detachment to handle such reviews objectively."

The Los Angeles Times chimed in: "We wouldn't think of letting an oil company decide whether a new offshore rig might harm the ocean; we wouldn't allow a pharmaceutical company to market a new medication on its say-so that the drug is safe. Why would we let the Department of Transportation build a new road through the habitat of the California gnatcatcher because its engineers claim that the project would do no harm?"

As Time Magazine put it: "[T]he evaluation of whether an action harms an endangered species would be made not by trained biologists but by bureaucrats."

The Interior Department raised even more suspicions about its motives by fast-tracking the proposal — allowing only 30 days for comment rather than the more common 60 or 90 days. That would mean the new rules would take effect before the November presidential election.

"Eleventh-hour rulemakings rarely, if ever, lead to good government," Rep. Nick Rahall, the Democratic chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee said in the Washington Post. "This is not the type of legacy this Interior Department should be leaving for future generations."

In the face of strong skepticism, Kempthorne did get a few sympathetic hearings. The Wall Street Journal put it this way: "In announcing the proposed changes, Mr. Kempthorne described them as an attempt to respond to the frustrations of Fish and Wildlife Service officials, who he said often have been unable to prioritize as a result of the many consultation requests from other agencies."

The Las Vegas Review-Journal also supported the Bush Administration. Its editorial called the Endangered Species Act a major contributor to the federal government's "morbid obesity". Supporters of the Act "are determined to retain their power to protect shrubs, unremarkable minnows and common creepy-crawlies if it takes every last dime of your money to do it."

"The proposal is a perfectly reasonable response to decades of abuse by environmental organizations," the paper concluded.

The move did manage to shift the debate. Before the Administration put forth its proposal, critics were actually complaining that Fish and Wildlife Service biologists were not the last best hope for endangered species, but often junior staffers with minimal academic credentials, and often not up to the task of deciding whether projects actually jeopardized endangered species. In fact, just a few days after the Interior Department made its announcement, the AP reported that Fish and Wildlife biologists are planning to reduce by 1.6 million acres the amount of old-growth forest set aside to assure the survival of the Northern Spotted Owl — despite its continued decline.

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Palm reach

Germany's Max Planck Society has secured funding for its first institute on US soil, due to open next year. **Michael Gross** reports.

The Max Planck Society is famous for its around 80 research institutes (MPIs) scattered all over Germany, where top researchers can follow their dreams unencumbered by teaching or excessive admin duties. What is less well known is that the society also runs three institutes abroad. The oldest of these goes back to a donation of Henriette Hertz, who left the Palazzo Zuccari in Rome to the Kaiser Wilhelm Gesellschaft, which opened an institute for art history in 1913. Reopened as an MPI in 1953, the Bibliotheca Hertziana is now one of the leading centres for Italian art history and has just completed a major new building with library facilities, supported by private investors.

The society is now set to expand its portfolio of foreign MPIs in Rome, Florence, and Nijmegen (NL) with the first institute outside Europe, in the sunny climes of Florida. The Max Planck Florida Institute will be a biomedical research centre located on the campus of Florida Atlantic University (FAU) at Jupiter, Palm Beach County, just over 100 km north of Miami.

A key factor in the choice of this location was the presence of the Scripps Florida Institute, which

By Jupiter: The beach close to the new Max Planck institute's Florida home. (Picture: Patrick Lynch/Alamy.)

Anniversary: This year marks 150 years since the birth of Max Planck. (Picture: Science Source/Science Photo Library.)

specialises in basic biomedical research and drug discovery. It was established in 2003 with major financial incentives from the state and is due to move into permanent accommodation by early 2009. Max Planck and Scripps plan to collaborate on health research. Moreover, the Germans and their US hosts hope that the presence of these two institutes will swiftly attract related companies and lead to the crystallisation of a biotech cluster.

With this reasoning, Palm Beach County's Board of Commissioners approved a $86.9 million grant for the building. Together with contributions from FAU and other partners, the funding totals $94 million, matching a separate payout from Florida's Innovation Incentive Fund, which was agreed in March. With the start-up funding secured, the foundation of the new institute is now a certainty. It will move into temporary facilities on the FAU campus in the spring of 2009, and building work on its permanent home is expected to start in 2010.

The institute plans to employ around 150 researchers, mainly working on imaging techniques, ultimately aimed at biomedical applications. Max Planck president Peter Gruss said: "When we achieve a deeper understanding of the structure, dynamics and function of molecules and tissues, we can then address some of the most challenging problems in biology, bioengineering, and medicine, which can ultimately be used to help improve medical diagnostics and medical care."

It will also offer space to visiting scholars and engage in education through collaboration with FAU and local schools. Peter Gruss promised: "We will invest three percent of net royalty revenue generated through our Florida-based research into the promotion of science education, such as scholarships to local science students."

For the Max Planck Society and German science in general, the Florida institute will also be a valuable foothold in the US, facilitating collaborations and transatlantic moves of German and international researchers. The society has a track record of luring highly successful scientists back from overseas. Especially for researchers who had breakthrough success in the US, and who wouldn't be tempted by German professorships, the offer of the directorship of a Max Planck 'Abteilung' has often been the key to reversing the brain drain, demonstrating its competitiveness on a global scale. Similarly, the society, which has produced 17 Nobel laureates so far, will see its move into sunny Florida not as an escape from Germany, but as a bid to compete with the world's finest.

Along these lines, the society is also looking to establish a number of more loosely associated 'partner institutes' in other countries, following the example of the Institute for Computational Biology in Shanghai, a joint venture of the MPS and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Such partner institutes are also under consideration in Argentina and India, where the society already collaborates with nine different groups. "Following a systematic analysis of local conditions and dependent on the overseas partner, we are endeavouring to find and establish the ideal form of cooperation to suit each location," Peter Gruss explained. "Our aim is to strengthen the presence of German science in those key countries that are of decisive importance to us."

Link: http://www.mpg.de/english/portal/index.html

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New forest guide

A new book detailing the trees in the Congo rainforest will provide a key help to conservationists. **Nigel Williams** reports.

One glimmer of positive news amongst mostly negative assessments in the recent IUCN's report on the status of the world's primates was the discovery of a previously unknown and substantial population of western lowland gorillas in the Republic of Congo. Researchers now estimate the population of this species at between 175,000 and 225,000. The discovery focuses new attention on this region, which will be crucial if biologists are to protect several of our closest primate relatives.

A new book, the result of a research collaboration over more than 15 years, has just been published, outlining taxonomic details of all the main tree species in this region of forest, which will provide a vital conservation tool for biologists working in this area.

David Harris, at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, has been working in these Congo forests with his colleague Jean-Marie Moutsambote at the University of Brazzaville since 1992.

The new book is a result of collaboration also with Alexandra Wortley at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. *Sangha Trees* is a unique account of 522 species of forest trees growing in the Congo basin. "It attempts to address the scarcity of taxonomic information on plants in Central Africa by functioning as both an identification guide and a training manual. It is targeted at biologists in need of accurate identifications and scientific names for trees," says Harris.

The book represents "a lot of slow methodical work over many years," says Harris. Funded by the Darwin Initiative in the UK, *Sangha Trees* is written in both French and English and focuses on the key tree species in the Sangha Traditional Landscape, a network of protected areas in the Cameroon, the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo. While many authors protect their copyright, the new book has been published in A4 format to facilitate photocopying. It helps readers recognise key features of leaves from the trees with accurate illustrations by